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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BAGHDAD 003821

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SUBJECT: KEY SADRIST LEGISLATOR: IN IRAQ, IRAN IS EVERYWHERE

Classified By: Political Counselor Matt Tueller for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

¶1. (C) Summary: Sadr Trend CoR legislator Baha al-Aaraji claimed during a November 19 meeting that while Iran may not like the U.S., it likes the Iraqi people even less and is infiltrating Iraq at every level. He conceded that Iran has tried to penetrate the Sadr Trend through support to people like Qais al-Ghazali, but said the U.S. should wake up to the reality that the Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq (ISCI) is controlled by Iran. He characterized Sadr-SCI relations as bad and getting worse, complaining that Sadrists believe the USG is allied with ISCI and is working to delay provincial elections for fear that the Sadrists will defeat ISCI at the polls. He warned that a U.S. attempt to dismantle the Sadr Trend would be a mistake that would convert the movement into an uncontrollable rabble: rather, America should recognize that the Trend consists of "poor, angry, and uneducated Shia who have been oppressed for years" but can be brought into mainstream political life if treated with care. Baha has made demands in the media for immediate elections to replace the current CoR membership, and he made no attempt to disguise his displeasure with CoR leaders and his doubts about the competency of fellow legislators. He was also highly critical of Maliki, who he dismissed as a leader without courage who is under the sway of the Group of Four alignment. Baha, who is Chairman of the CoR Legal Committee, made clear his misgivings over many aspects of the pending De-Baathification Law but said the Sadrists would not attempt to block a vote on the bill and would seek instead to amend objectionable provisions. He assured us the bill would be formally presented to the CoR later that day (it was not, and Deputy CoR Speaker Attiyah blamed Baha for stalling the bill in committee). End Summary.

Iranian Influence: Hidden Out in the Open

¶2. (C) Iran may not like you, Baha said, but Iran likes the Iraqi people even less "and will never leave us alone." He claimed that Iran has infiltrated Iraq at every level and Iranian influence is "present everywhere, in the cabinet, in the legislature, in the judiciary, even in the Green Zone." Without further explanation, he asserted that GOI weakness makes the Iranian presence stronger and more difficult to see. After we expressed concern that Iran appears intent on using the Sadrists to steer Iraq in a dangerous direction, he conceded that Iran has tried to penetrate the Sadr Trend through support to individuals such as Qais al-Ghazali ("Moqtada al-Sadr has never asked you to release him from custody") but he vehemently denied that Moqtada is "with Iran." He advised us to talk to ISCI about its ties to Iran because, he claimed, ISCI is an Iranian-controlled organization.

The Sadr Trend - A Most Misunderstood Organization

¶3. (C) Nattily-attired and nervously chain-smoking imported

Rothmans cigarettes throughout the 45-minute meeting, Baha characterized Sadrist-ISCI relations as bad and getting worse. He alleged that ISCI controls GOI security in various provinces and regularly abuses such authority - sometimes with U.S. assistance, as in Diwaniyah - to attack their political rivals, the Sadrist. Baha said he fears that continued ISCI/GOI/MNF "squeezing" of the Jaysh al-Mahdi (JAM) will compel Moqtada al-Sadr to cancel his "freeze" order or, even worse, force JAM members into full attack mode "in order to preserve their honor and dignity." He confided that Sadrists believe the USG is allied with ISCI and is working to delay provincial elections for fear that the Sadrists will defeat ISCI at the polls. Baha predicted ISCI-Sadrist conflict will continue until local elections take place. He warned that a U.S. attempt to dismantle the Sadrist Trend would be a mistake that would convert the movement into an uncontrollable mob. Rather, we should better understand the Trend and recognize that it consists of "poor, angry and uneducated Shia who have been oppressed for years" but can be brought into mainstream political life if "treated with attention and care."

Scorn for the CoR and GOI

¶4. (C) Baha has made demands in the media for immediate elections to replace all current CoR members, and he made no attempt to disguise his displeasure with CoR leaders and his fellow legislators. For example, he criticized the "closed list" system used in the 2005 elections that brought him "and many uneducated, unqualified people" to the CoR, noting that he had been nominally elected from Nassariyah even though he had only visited the place a few times in his entire life, and that he would have received only a couple of thousand

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votes from family and friends if he had contested a seat in an "open list" election. Baha, who is Chairman of the CoR Legal Committee, claimed that most legislators had not bothered to read the lengthy draft Hydrocarbons Framework law. Taking a thinly-veiled swipe at ISCI, he groused that the CoR is dominated by parties with no popular base and that the CoR will remain a "useless" entity and a detriment to Iraq's people until new leadership and members are elected.

¶5. (C) He was equally caustic about GOI performance, claiming that improved security in Baghdad has little to do with GOI efforts. He hoped that services would improve and lead to reduced unemployment - the keys to sustained security progress - but expects no help in this regard from the GOI: if it happens, he claimed, it would be because of the work of a few competent, committed individuals in the GOI and not GOI leaders. Baha insisted that political blocs have more control over ministries than the Prime Minister, and that ministries serve blocs and not the people. Furthermore, ministers conspire against the Prime Minister at every opportunity though they claim to support him. He stated that ministers should be GOI technocrats, not political figures, and subject to the law like all Iraqi citizens. He dismissed Maliki as a leader who lacks courage, is unable to obtain cooperation of political blocs, and is controlled by the Group of Four alignment.

Mixed Feelings About De-Baath Law

¶6. (C) Baha made clear his misgivings over many aspects of the pending De-Baathification Law (i.e. the Law on Accountability and Justice) but said the Sadrist would not attempt to block a vote on the bill and would seek instead to amend objectionable - possibly even unconstitutional - provisions "and keep what is to the benefit of the people." Although he did not accuse the USG of intervening in the legislative process, he registered negative "surprise" when the draft De-Baath law his committee was preparing for presentation to the CoR was suddenly replaced last week by a

substitute draft without advance notice. Noting that his view on the bill is more relaxed than the Sadrists bloc position ("I may even vote for it if it is properly amended"), he said he is concerned that the bill does not adequately address compensation for the many victims of Baathist brutality, and also tends to focus on punishing organizational rank rather than actual criminal culpability. As an example, he noted that senior Baathists who helped him escape from Iraq in the Saddam era would be affected more negatively by the draft in its current form than the junior Baathists who assassinated his father. He stated that while the CoR could never achieve true justice "because justice belongs only to God" it still had a duty to be fair. He told us the bill would have a first reading in the CoR later that day: as it turned out, the first reading was delayed and Deputy CoR Speaker Khalid al-Attiyah blamed Baha for stalling the bill in committee.

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